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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR SECRETARY OF DEFENSE GATES VISIT
TO THAILAND

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Mr. Secretary, all of us in Bangkok look forward to your June 1-2 visit as an opportunity to advance key U.S. foreign policy interests. Your meeting with Prime Minister/Defense Minister Samak Sundaravej will provide an opportunity to emphasize the importance of Thailand to our regional security interests as the United States and Thailand celebrate 175 years of relations. You will also have an opportunity to underscore the United States Government's commitment to working with a democratically elected Thai government. End summary.

CLOSE U.S.-THAI RELATIONS

¶2. (C) The U.S.-Thai security relationship is based on over fifty years of close cooperation. Thailand is a Treaty Ally and Thai soldiers, sailors and airmen participated in the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts and Thai soldiers served in Afghanistan and Iraq. American businesses have over \$23 billion in direct investment in Thailand and the United States is Thailand's single largest export market and its second-largest foreign investor, after Japan.

¶3. (C) The strength of the military relationship is the result of an extensive security cooperation relationship, joint training, and a robust International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. The result of this close relationship is that Thailand provides the U.S. with unique opportunities including live fire training and ready access to Utapao Naval Air Base. Thailand's willingness to allow the United States to use Utapao Naval Air Station as the hub for our regional tsunami assistance program was key to making 2004 tsunami relief operations a success and for ongoing relief flights to Burma after the recent cyclone.

¶3. (C) Beyond emergency operations, U.S. forces regularly access Utapao, primarily for flights serving operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, Utapao was designated as the most important Cooperative Security Location (CSL) in the Asia Pacific Region. While we avoid using the term "CSL" with the Thai to avoid sensitivities regarding the perception of foreign basing, Utapao remains vital to our interests in the region and is accessed by close to nine hundred flights annually. In your meetings with Thai military officials, you will have the opportunity to note our desire to return to a more healthy military-military relationship and to reaffirm the importance and value we place on the relationship. We

also enjoy excellent cooperation on counterterrorism and law enforcement, as demonstrated by the recent collaboration that led to the arrest of international arms dealer Victor Bout.

REWARDING MILITARY EXERCISE PROGRAM

14. (C) Thailand gives the U.S. military a platform for exercises unique in Asia. Thailand offers the United States military good base infrastructure, large areas in which our aircraft and ground forces can conduct unrestricted operations and access to bombing ranges -- all in short supply in Asia. Located near strategic maritime choke points and having good liberty ports, Thailand also has the potential to play a greater role in U.S. Naval planning. Perhaps due to their lack of a colonial heritage, Thai leaders are far more willing to host multilateral exercises than are other countries in Asia. Unlike Japan, which only hosts annual bilateral exercises due to legal prohibitions over collective security, or Australia, which avoids multilateral exercises so as not to "dumb down" its own training opportunities, the Royal Thai Government supports multilateral exercises as a way to show regional leadership.

This has allowed us to use our exercises in Thailand to further key U.S. objectives such as supporting Japan's growing military role in Asia and engaging the TNI and the Singaporean military. We have just finished our annual Cobra Gold exercise -- the only multilateral training exercise in the Asia-Pacific region. The quick ramping of relief operations at Utapao and our military's ability to interact rapidly with Thai counterparts during the recent post-cyclone crisis in Burma underscored the results of decades of joint

combined exercises, training and cooperation. Other annual bilateral and multilateral exercises conducted with the Thais include CARAT, COPE TIGER, and BALANCE TORCH -- all of which, when coupled with long-standing professional military education ties and weapons procurement programs, serve to illustrate a close and significant relationship between the U.S. and Thai Armed Forces.

POLITICAL TENSION REMAINS

15. (C) Despite Thailand's peaceful transition back to an elected government earlier this year, underlying tensions remain unresolved. In 2005, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra won an overwhelming majority in the parliament, but he was accused of abuse of power, corruption, and disrespect for the monarchy. In 2006, months of political protests and legal battles led to a political stalemate over charges against Thaksin and his party. The Royal Thai Army launched a coup d'etat in September 2006 after months of political conflict and many Thais accepted the coup as a means to resolve the protracted political crisis. However, most Thais soured on the interim administration as it was unable to solve underlying political problems. The victory by pro-Thaksin People's Power Party in the December 2007 election was a setback for supporters of the coup but it did not resolve the underlying political conflicts in Thai society. Tensions over fundamental questions, such as the balance of power between urban elite and the rural population, could lead to further conflict and calls for military intervention.

SOUTHERN THAILAND

16. (C) Southern Thailand has witnessed episodic violence since its incorporation into Thailand in 1902 and violence in the ethnic Malay Muslim-led insurgency in southern Thailand has claimed some 3000 lives since January 2004. The interim government of former Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont made some attempts at ending the violence through reconciliation, but lack of political support and preoccupation with the on-going political tensions in Bangkok caused these efforts to stall. The root causes of the insurgency -- government neglect, human rights abuses, and a lack of social justice,

combined with a desire for some form of self-determination, have not been addressed by any Thai government to this point.

¶17. (C) Although there is not yet evidence of foreign involvement in Southern Thailand, Jemaah Islamiyah has exploited similar Muslim separatist and religious tensions in Indonesia, and we remain concerned by the possibility that southern unrest may attract international terrorist groups. Southern separatists direct their anger at the government in Bangkok, not at the United States. Since a U.S. presence or perception of U.S. involvement in the South could redirect that anger towards us and link it to the international jihadist movement -- a link that is currently absent -- we ensure that any offers of assistance or training pass the "location and label" test. Put simply, we keep U.S. military personnel away from the far South and we make sure that we do not label any assistance or training as directly linked to the southern situation. The Thai government has supported this approach and is extremely wary of any perception of U.S. involvement in the issue.

¶18. (C) The Embassy maintains a three-pronged focus to improve our military cooperation in order to address the violence in the South:

- 1) Using our exercise and training program to improve the professional and operational skills of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, especially the Thai Army;
- 2) Helping the Thai break down stovepipes between the Thai military, police forces, and civilian agencies;
- 3) Doing everything we can to ensure the Thai respect international human rights norms as they counter the violence.

DIFFERING VIEWS ON BURMA

¶19. (C) Responding to the crackdown last year in Burma by the authorities, then-Prime Minister Surayud used his appearance at the UN General Assembly to criticize publicly the Burmese regime's actions in a manner that we viewed as constructive. In general, however, the Thai bureaucracy, and especially the military, fears instability in Burma will spill over across Thailand's border. Thailand relies on Burma for substantial energy imports as well. These factors incline Thailand to not challenge the status quo.

REFUGEES SEEN AS A SECURITY ISSUE

¶10. (C) The Thai government sees refugee issues as a security matter and has assigned the National Security Council as the lead policy agency on the issue. Most of the 140,000 Burmese refugees stay in nine official camps along the border. The U.S. accepted over 10,000 of these refugees for resettlement last year and we expect to reach at least that level this year and for the foreseeable future. About 8,000 Lao Hmong are kept in a Royal Thai Army-run facility in northern Petchaboon province. The Thai have set up an internal, non-transparent screening process for this vulnerable group, which may include individuals (and their descendants) who assisted the U.S. during the Indochina war. This process also involves other ministries including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We are uncertain, however, whether the Thai screening process will meet international standards; the Thai have refused to allow UNHCR to play any role in these refugee determinations. We believe that a portion of the group, but not a majority, may have a legitimate claim to refugee status and could face harsh treatment by the Lao government if returned. Your visit offers an important opportunity to underscore to the RTG the importance of providing international standards of protection to those who might have a well-founded fear of return. Thailand has also permitted us to process, on a case by case basis, a small number of North Korean refugees who wish to resettle in the U.S.

INFLUENCE FROM REGIONAL ACTORS

¶11. (C) Thailand continues to feel the rising influence of China. While emphasizing the vital role of the U.S. in the region -- and Thailand's desire to intensify U.S. engagement -- Thai leaders also focus on developing stronger relations with China. While Thai military links with the United States are deeper and far more apparent than Sino-Thai links, China's growing influence in Thailand is evident. The Thai military has a number of Chinese weapons systems in its arsenal and, after the 2006 coup; China offered Thailand \$40 million in military assistance and training. In July 2007, China and Thailand conducted their first-ever combined training. Called "Strike-2007", the training marked the first joint military training that China had held with another country. The Chinese Navy has worked to intensify ties with the RTN with a ship visit to Phuket, a joint search and rescue exercise in the Andaman Sea, and the sale of equipment. Mil-to-mil exchanges and VIP visits between China and Thailand have also expanded; including attendance by the Chinese Minister of Defense and a very large delegation of generals at the King's birthday celebrations last year. Russia and India lag behind China for influence in Thailand despite attempts to forge closer ties with Thailand.

IN CLOSING

¶12. (U) We look forward to making your visit a success. Yours is the first Defense Secretary visit in three years and the Thai are excited that you will visit their country.
JOHN